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Seven Rules for Sustainable Communities: Design Strategies for the Post-Carbon World
By Patrick M. Condon

REVIEWED BY DON ALEXANDER, BA, MA, PHD, MCIP

THE VIRTUE OF this book is not its originality as the majority of its ideas have been explored elsewhere. Its virtue lies in bringing so much useful information together in a single volume, much of it in a plainspoken and accessible form.

This book explores the need to rethink how we build cities and to learn from urban forms that have worked admirably in the past and which continue to function well in places like Vancouver. Condon, a professor of landscape architecture at the University of British Columbia and senior researcher at the Design Centre for Sustainability critiques current urban development patterns—sprawled, and to a lesser degree, high-rise—from ecological, social, and infrastructural cost and efficiency perspectives, and he offers alternatives in the form of seven rules for sustainable communities.

The main underlying message, as evidenced by the book’s subtitle—Design Strategies for a Post-Carbon World—is that ameliorating climate change has to begin in cities which, according to his calculations, are responsible for 80% of greenhouse gas emissions, 40% arising from buildings and 40% from transportation. If residential, commercial and industrial structures are low-density and land uses are segregated, which forces people to drive between home, work, and services, energy demand and GHG production will be dramatically higher.

The format of the book is an interesting one. With larger page dimensions (8½” by 10”), its outside columns are devoted to text, and inside columns to photos, diagrams and extensive footnotes.

A chapter is devoted to each of the seven rules; which include:

- Restore the streetcar city
- Design an interconnected street system
- Locate commercial services, frequent transit, and schools within a five-minute walk
- Locate good jobs close to affordable homes
- Provide a diversity of housing types
- Create a linked system of natural areas and parks
- Invest in lighter, greener, cheaper, smarter infrastructure

For Condon, the master principle from which all the others spring is the streetcar city. According to him, the virtue of these streetcar city neighbourhoods is that they integrate land uses, enable people to walk to services and transit, permit gentle increases in density and diversity of housing types, while still enabling homeowners and renters to continue to enjoy the feeling of a ‘single family’ neighbourhood, even though the lots are relatively small.

While I think one can challenge whether densities in these neighbourhoods will ever be sufficient to achieve adequate levels of sustainability, especially given the often-bitter resistance to even mild forms of densification, he offers well-argued critiques of high-rise development as not being ecologically efficient while being socially alienating at the same time. For him, mid-rise residential development is the most ecologically efficient, while retaining a ground-oriented ambience.

In addition to challenging the efficacy of high-rise developments, Condon strongly questions the often-stated preference for urban nodes. He states that much of the vitality of streetcar cities occurs on the linear ‘high streets’, not in nodes, and that this sets the North American experience apart from Europe and elsewhere. He also favours the grid, something that has returned to favour since Jane Jacobs’ early writings, and he has no use for such massive grade-separated transit investments as SkyTrain, preferring instead light rail and trams that operate on surface streets.

While there is some repetition, for the most part the book is tightly organized and well written, with just enough detail in each chapter. The one exception is the last chapter, about infrastructure, which focuses largely on storm water management. In this case, he tells us more about natural methods for managing storm water than most readers will likely want to know, or will ever use.

This is an important book—useful both as a reference for practitioners, and as a textbook for planning classes. I am happy that he wrote it. My only question is: why didn’t a planner write it first?

DON ALEXANDER, BA, MA, PHD, MCIP, is a University-College Professor in Geography at Vancouver Island University, and writes extensively about smart growth, urban sustainability, and place-making. He can be reached at: Don.Alexander@viu.ca